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Tolkien's Monsters: Concept and Function in *The Lord of the Rings* (Part III): Sauron

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Abstract

Three-part examination of “how Tolkien’s theory of the centrality of the monsters in *Beowulf* influenced his own concept of ‘monster’ and what function that concept should fulfill within” *The Lord of the Rings*. The conclusion traces the development of the character of Sauron through preliminary versions in *The History of Middle-earth* and analyzes the climactic episode at Mount Doom in terms of Sauron’s success as monster and Frodo’s as hero.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Sauron; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Sauron —Development

Tolkien's Monsters:

Concept and Function in The Lord of the Rings

(PART III) SAURON

Joe Abbott

PART I: Evolution of the Concept

"Sauron represents as near an approach to the wholly evil will as is possible." (Let. 243)

Sauron, more than any of the characters encountered in *LotR*, undergoes a metamorphosis that from a conceptual perspective can be described as nothing short of bizarre. He enters into the history of Middle-earth as a secondary antagonist, a monster of lesser degree than Morgoth, the original "Dark Lord" and principal antagonist of the First Age. He then "graduates" in a sense when "Morgoth himself the Valar thrust through the Door of Night beyond the Walls of the World, into the Timeless Void" (Sil. 254) at the close of the First Age so that by the time of his appearance in the Third Age — the period with which *LotR* deals — he is himself Middle-earth's reigning Dark Lord. Conceptually, then, the Sauron of *LotR* corresponds directly to the Morgoth of Tolkien's earlier tales, complete with his own Dark Realm (Mordor) corresponding to Morgoth's Angband, fortress-tower (Barad-dûr) corresponding to Morgoth's Thangorodrim, and "chief thane" of Maian origin (Saruman the White) — an Istari whom he has corrupted in much the same way that he himself was first "corrupted by the Prime Dark Lord . . . Morgoth" (Let. 190). As "Dark Lord" of the Third Age, Sauron assumes in a sense even his mentor's name, which is "formed from his Orc-name *Goth* 'Lord or Master' with *mor* 'dark or black' prefixed" (HME 2: 67).

Sauron derives from the Sindarin root *thaur* "abominable, abhorrent" (Sil. 364), being, as Tolkien explains, "a contemporary form of an older **thaurond-* derivative of an adjectival **thaura* (from a base *THAW*) 'detestable'" (Let. 380). The *thaur* morpheme is still detectable in the Sindarin language of the First Age where the Sindar refer to Sauron as "Gorthaur the Cruel." Tolkien apparently first considered the name Sauron as early as March 31, 1928 (See HME 3: 232-3) where line 2064 of *The Lay of Leithian* underwent the following revisions:

Men called him Thu, and as a god . . .
Gnomes called him Sauron, as a god . . .
Gnomes called him Gorthu, as a god . . .

Tolkien had thus conceived of the name — rejecting it in favor of *Gorthu* — long before he actually penned it for the first time into the chronicles of Middle-earth on September 16, 1931 in lines 3947 and 3951 of that same poem (See HME 3: 304). The character of Morgoth's chief thane, however, had long before this date been an important antagonist for the various heroes (and heroines) of Middle-earth. I would

therefore like to examine here the development of Sauron's character evidenced in Tolkien's earliest writings, disregarding name when that name seems of secondary import to the actions of the character — that is, actions that indicate distinct formative ideas that in Tolkien's later writings would be attributed specifically to Sauron.

We catch our first glimpse of Sauron as early as 1917 in *The Tale of Tinuviel*. In this, the earliest telling of the story that would become "Of Beren and Luthien" (Sil. 162ff), we find the account of Beren's capture and enslavement in Sauron's dungeons. Many of the motifs present in the finished tale do not appear in the initial version of the story, and because citing and tracing all of these ideas is not the purpose of the present study, I will limit my examination to the character functioning in the capacity of the pre-Sauron role. This character is Tevildo, Prince of Cats. A short summary of the episode follows: Beren (here an Elf) is captured by Morgoth's forces and given over to Tevildo, Prince of Cats, where he serves as a kitchen slave. Tinuviel laments her separation from Beren, finds out what has happened to him, and goes to rescue him. On her way she meets Huan, Captain of Dogs, who promises to help her. They plan to trick Tevildo into thinking Huan is sick so that Tevildo will come out to kill him. Tinuviel gains audience with Tevildo and convinces him that Huan lies sick in the woods. Tevildo goes with her to find him and subsequently to dispatch him. Huan, however, ambushes Tevildo, subdues him, and orders him on pain of death to surrender up Beren to Tinuviel. Tevildo does so and Huan allows him to return home.

Although Tevildo functions here in the role that will later be assumed by Sauron, this early character fails for several reasons. The younger Tolkien — 25 years old at the writing of *The Tale of Tinuviel* — had not yet achieved the narrative style that would in later versions of his tales contribute so heavily to the Northern tone applauded by scholars as one (if not the) essential element characterizing his artistry. As a result we find that much — indeed, most — of the dialogue is what might best be described as a sort of "plastic Elizabethan." A short example should serve as an adequate illustration:

"Why," said Tevildo, "do ye dare to bring such a creature before me, unless perchance it is to make meat of him?" But those who led Beren said: "Nay, 'twas the word of Melko that this unhappy Elf wear out his life as a catcher of beasts and birds in Tevildo's employ." Then indeed did Tevildo screech in scorn and said: "Then in sooth was my lord asleep or his thoughts were settled elsewhere. . . ." (HME 2: 16)

This flowery and artificial rhetoric detracts seriously from any sense of real terror that we are meant to detect in this character, leaving us instead with a rather confused sensation of having heard bad Shakespeare being spoken by Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat. We are constantly assaulted, throughout this long tale (40+ pages), by similar tonal incongruities, dissonances that Tolkien would eventually come to realize were robbing his story of the effect he sought. The passage ends weakly with the fablesque explanation that "now no longer did [Huan] fear the cats, and that tribe has fled before the dogs ever since, and the dogs hold them still in scorn since the humbling of Tevildo" (HME 2: 29).

Tolkien wisely abandoned the character of Tevildo, and Christopher Tolkien observes that

in the next phase of the legends the Necromancer (Thu) has no feline attributes. On the other hand it would be wrong to regard it as a simple matter of replacement (Thu stepping into the narrative place vacated by Tevildo) without any element of transformation of what was previously there. (HME 2: 54)

The "next phase of the legends" to which C. Tolkien refers consists of *The Lay of the Children of Hurin* (1920-25), and it is here that we first encounter Thu. He appears briefly in lines 390-2:

... and Thu feared him [Turin] —
Thu who was throned as thane most mighty
neath Morgoth Bauglir; ... (HME 3: 16)

The character is not developed any further in this poem, and that Tolkien later revised subsequent references to read *Gorthu* strongly suggests the possibility that the name was perhaps initially adopted solely as an alliterative device. Although I find no indication of etymological derivation for Thu among Tolkien's notes on Elvish tongues, it is extremely tempting to perceive the element as the origin of the later *thaur*. *Thu* > *Gorthu* > *Gorthaur*/Sauron seems to me a logical (and probable) course of development; but whatever the reason for Tolkien's choice of the name, "Thu" assumes the role of chief thane to the Dark Lord at this point, and Tevildo is never again mentioned.

In the 1926 prose "Sketch" of *The Silmarillion*, we have the first retelling of the Beren and Tinuviel episode in which Thu assumes the role formerly held by Tevildo: "Beren... is captured... and is given as a slave to Thu the hunter" (HME 4: 24-5). Just as the earlier version had served to introduce Melko/Morgoth's chief thane into the story, so this is the first reference to Thu in the early stage of *The Silmarillion* — it is the only place that he is given the ambiguous title of "the hunter." Tolkien later revised this account, adding two new ideas that would remain in the final version recorded in *The Silmarillion*: (1) Beren is accompanied by Felagoth (Felagund) and "a small band" (HME 4: 25) and (2) "the hunter" is changed to "Lord of Wolves." The only other reference to Thu in the "Sketch" occurs in the 19th chapter where he is described as "[Morgoth's] great chief who escaped the Last Battle and dwells still in dark places, and perverts Men to his dreadful worship" (HME 4: 42). Tolkien then, in the passage that

relates Morgoth's defeat and exile from Middle-earth, leaves open the possibility of Thu's appearance in subsequent tales.

It is not until *The Lay of Leithian* (1925-1931) that Tolkien, after a much more detailed introduction (ll. 2064-79), begins to develop this increasingly potent adversary. Here, also, we note in a literal sense what Christopher Tolkien refers to as the "element of transformation" as we find the first indication that Thu Lord of Wolves is himself a lycanthrope:

Men called him Thu, and as a god
in after days beneath his rod
bewildered bowed to him, and made
his ghastly temples in the shade.
Not yet by men enthralled adored,
now was he Morgoth's mightiest lord,
Master of Wolves whose shivering howl
for ever echoed in the hills, and foul
enchancements and dark seldry
did weave and wield. In glamour
that necromancer held his hosts
of phantoms and of wandering ghosts,
of misbegotten or spell-wronged
monsters that about him thronged,
working his bidding dark and vile:
the werewolves of the Wizard's Isle. (HME 3: 227)

Tolkien was apparently never really satisfied with the name *Thu*, for beginning with this reference (March 31, 1928) — the first reference to Morgoth's chief thane since the two brief mentions in the "Sketch" of *The Silmarillion* (1926) — Tolkien consistently altered every reference to this character to read *Gorthu* up until line 2287 (April 1 or 2, 1928). At this point he resumed the use of *Thu* on all but one occasion (line 3290, Sept. 27, 1930) up to line 3947 (Sept. 16, 1931) where *Sauron* occurs for the first time. Thus, we can chart this development:

Thu "thane most mighty" - c. 1920
Thu "Lord of Wolves" - 1926
Sauron (considered but rejected) - 1928
Gorthu (used briefly) - 1928
Thu (resumed) - 1928
Sauron (first occurrence) - 1931

The visual and chronological implications here suggest that, not wholly satisfied with *Thu*, Tolkien briefly (two or three days) considered an attempt to further intensify this important monster by adding the Elvish morpheme "gor" (horror, dread) (*Silm.* 359). As we have seen, this certainly would have been characteristic of Tolkien, who delighted in using nomenclature as a means of characterizing his monsters; thus, the abominable, horrible creature *Gorthu* is literally the "Abominable Horror," deriving from *Gor* ("horror") + *thu* (> *thaur* ? "abominable"). Still dissatisfied with the name *Gorthu*, however, Tolkien resumed the use of *Thu*, continuing to use it for the next three and a half years (with one exception), opting finally to discard both forms of the word altogether in favor of the wholly different name of *Sauron*.

A further embellished version of the Tevildo episode, in which Tinuviel acquires the new name of Luthien,

constitutes the next 775 lines of *Leithian*. As with the initial episode, I present the relevant motifs in summary: Beren and Felagund, leading a company of ten Gnomes, are captured by (Gor)Thú's wolves and brought before (Gor)Thú. The twelve are sentenced to be devoured one by one by werewolves. All are eventually devoured except Beren. Luthien, who during Beren's long absence has befriended the wolf-hound Huan, sees Beren's situation in a dream and accompanied by Huan goes to rescue him. Tú comes forth "... as wolf more great / than ere was seen from Angband's gate" (*HME* 3: 252-3), intending to kill Huan and give Luthien as a gift to Morgoth. Huan, however, defeats him, and Tú must surrender the keys to his fortress before he flies away as a vampire bat "to Taur-na-Fuin, a new throne / and darker stronghold there to build" (*HME* 3: 255). Thus, just as "Tevildo was 'an evil fay in beastlike shape'" (*HME* 2: 54), so his immediate successor, Tú—a shape-shifter and the Lord of Wolves—comes forth "in beastlike shape" as Tolkien moves closer to the final version of this passage as recorded in *The Silmarillion*.

At this point in the development of Sauron, we begin to note the undeniable influence of the Sigmund story found in the fifth chapter of *The Volsungasaga*. Even from the formative stages beginning with *The Tale of Tinuviel*, the existence of certain similarities between the two accounts suggests that Beren's capture and rescue derived their inspiration from the story of Sigmund and his sister, Signy. This is no doubt one of the principal reasons that the Elizabethan language in *Tinuviel* falls flat, failing to cohere with the Northern tone and atmosphere indicated by the situations within Tolkien's narrative. In both stories we find the hero captured and later rescued by a female, but *The Lay of Leithian* introduces more specific parallels to *Volsungasaga*, parallels not present in *Tinuviel*. A summary of chapter 5 from *The Volsungasaga* follows: King Volsung and his 10 sons (one of which is Sigmund) journey to Gautland to visit the king's daughter, Signy, and new son-in-law, King Siggeir. On their arrival they are warned by Signy that her new husband intends to slay them. Battle ensues. King Volsung is slain, but his sons are placed in stocks and left in the forest. Each night for nine consecutive nights a great she-wolf comes and devours one son. When only Sigmund is left, Signy devises a plan by which he is saved. Sigmund kills the she-wolf, who some say was actually King Siggeir's mother, a werewolf.

First, then, in *The Lay of Leithian* Beren is no longer the semi-comic Elf in the role of bumbling kitchen slave that we see in *The Tale of Tinuviel*. He is a warrior of some renown—as is Sigmund—and a character that we are to take seriously. Like Sigmund he is accompanied on his journey by an elder warrior and a small group of companions. Like Sigmund he is captured after he has been orphaned, losing his father as a result of betrayal by a trusted individual. (Lines 151-236 relate the tale of Gorlim's betrayal into Morgoth's hands of Beren's father, Barahir, and his 10 outlaw companions.) Most notable, however, is the changing of the feline adversary to a

werewolf and the devouring one by one of the hero's companions.

Christopher Tolkien notes that it was not until 1931 that Tolkien put aside *The Lay of Leithian*: "... he abandoned it in September 1931. ... [T]he last date is 17 September of that year against line 4085 very near the point where the Lay was abandoned" (*HME* 3: 150); and it is highly probable that Tolkien stopped work on *Leithian* to direct his attention towards *The Hobbit*, of which, according to Carpenter, "A text was in existence by the winter of 1932" (Let. 14). There is no indication that Tolkien directed any significant attention to the character of Sauron for several years after the abandonment of *Leithian* in 1931. Two passing references to "the Necromancer" appear in *The Hobbit*, but we do not see any absolute evidence of a positive attempt on Tolkien's part to further develop this concept until chapter 2 of Book 2 of *LotR* where Gandalf, at the Council of Elrond, reveals that

"... I myself dared to pass the doors of the Necromancer of Dol Guldur, and secretly explored his ways, and found thus that our fears were true: he was none other than Sauron, Our Enemy of old..." (1: 263).

Tolkien, as his letters indicate, wrote this chapter sometime between February and December of 1939. We thus have a period of no less than 7 1/2 years (Sept. 1931-Feb. 1939) in which Tolkien's ideas—not only with regard to Sauron, but to numerous other aspects of the Middle-earth mythology as well—would inevitably have undergone various changes; thus, even though only two passing references to a necromantic adversary occur in *The Hobbit*, these two references appear to have sparked the final "transformation" that the character of Sauron was to undergo: "[LotR] is more grown up—but the audience for which *The Hobbit* was written has done that also. The readers young and old who clamoured for 'more about the Necromancer' are to blame, for the N. is not child's play" (Let. 42).

Because of Tolkien's characteristic practice of revising time and again the various texts that comprise the chronicles of Middle-earth, it is difficult to state with any degree of certainty the period at which he first conceived of the Dark Lord specifically as a "necromancer." We can see, however, that in the early stages of Tú-Sauron's development, even when he is on occasion reputed to practice necromancy, he is essentially a physical being. He is a "thane," > a "hunter," > a shape-shifter (both lycanthrope and vampire), and even as late as 1928, when Tú is specifically called "that necromancer," he is in the same passage referred to as a physical monster, a werewolf "whose shivering howl / for ever echoed in the hills" (*HME* 3: 228). Not until *The Hobbit* do we encounter "the Necromancer" proper, and it is far from certain that Tolkien originally conceived of *The Hobbit's* Necromancer and the then already extant character of Sauron as one and the same monster, for later—in a letter he would write in 1964—Tolkien claimed that

The magic ring was the one obvious thing in *The Hobbit* that could be connected with my mythology. To be the

burden of a large story it had to be of supreme importance. I then linked it with the (originally) quite casual reference to the Necromancer... whose function was hardly more than to provide a reason for Gandalf going away and leaving Bilbo and the Dwarves to fend for themselves.... (Let. 346, italics mine)

It is certainly conceivable that necromancy could have been practiced by any number of other sorcerers in Tolkien's mythology, sorcerers of lesser power and import than Sauron; nevertheless, the Sauron of *LotR* is first positively identified as "the Necromancer" at the Council of Elrond. He is, however, no longer the substantial necromancer of Tolkien's earlier lays; indeed, from the first reference in *LotR* to "Sauron the Great, the Dark Lord" (1: 60), he is consistently described in nebulous terms — the "Shadow," the "Enemy," the "Power" — intended to enhance his omnipresence (his "dark-lordship") and potentially apocalyptic influence on the events of Third-Age Middle-earth. Sauron has thus become primarily a spiritual presence.

This non-substantive depiction has provoked Verlyn Flieger, in "Frodo and Aragorn: The Concept of the Hero," to mistakenly assume that "... while [Sauron] is all evil, he is not concrete enough to fit Tolkien's criteria for monsters. For him they must be 'mortal denizens of the material world, in it and of it'" (Isaacs & Zimbaro, *New* 56). A look at the statement to which Flieger makes reference, however, indicates that such is not the case. Tolkien's statement is directed at the monsters of *Beowulf*:

Most important is it to consider how and why the monsters become 'adversaries of God,' and so begin to symbolize (and ultimately to become identified with) the powers of evil, even while they remain, as they do still remain in *Beowulf*, mortal denizens of the material world, in it and of it. (*M&C* 20)

Tolkien's statement here is simply an observation on the monsters within the poem towards which his study was directed; it is not necessarily a conviction by which he conducted his own creative processes. Sauron's lack of materiality in no way conflicts with "Tolkien's criteria for monsters" but in fact enhances the concept, and we can see this if we look at "Monsters and Critics" as a whole rather than focusing on a single phrase (which Flieger has removed from its original context) as the source of Tolkien's creative philosophy.

The monsters in *Beowulf* remain primarily physical because it was the physical adversary that most provoked and fascinated the Anglo-Saxon audience. The *Beowulf* poet's imagination was thus directed at the corporeal, the temporal, and his monsters could only "begin to symbolize... the powers of evil." But what is important here is that the monsters do begin that symbolization and in so doing begin to reflect the merging of traditional pagan ideas with the newer concepts of Christianity. The poet refers to Grendel as "maere mearcstapa" (notorious haunter of the mark) who "fifelcynnes eard... weardode hwile" (guarded for a time the land of the race of monsters). He then describes him as one whom "...

Sceppend forscifen haefta" (God had condemned and) "forwraec... mancynne fram" (banished from mankind) as one of "Caines cynne" (the race of Cain). Thus, in the space of 8 lines (103-10) the poet portrays a tangible monster that is hostile to pagan and Christian alike. Such merging of ideas prompted Tolkien to make the following observation:

They [the monsters] are directly connected with Scripture, yet they cannot be dissociated from the creatures of northern myth.... But this is not due to mere confusion—it is rather an indication of the precise point at which an imagination, pondering old and new, was kindled. (*M&C* 26)

Tolkien emphasizes, however, that although "... in England this imagination was brought into touch with Christendom, and the Scriptures" — thus evidencing a cultural awakening to the principles of Christianity — "The process of 'conversion' was a long one" (*M&C* 21). This combination of "new faith and new learning" with "a body of native tradition" (*M&C* 21) results in the seemingly contradictory pagan and Christian themes that permeate *Beowulf*:

The changes which produced... the mediaeval devil are not complete in *Beowulf*, but in Grendel change and blending are, of course, already apparent.... Doubtless ancient pre-Christian imagination vaguely recognized differences of 'materiality' between the solidly physical monsters... and ghosts or bogies. Monsters of more or less human shape were naturally liable to development on contact with Christian ideas of sin and spirits of evil. Their parody of human form... becomes symbolical, explicitly, of sin, or rather this mythical element, already present implicit and unresolved, is emphasized. (*M&C* 34)

It should be noted that Tolkien's comments here still focus directly on the monsters of *Beowulf*. We see, however, no such apparent conflict of pagan and Christian themes in *LotR* because Tolkien drew his inspiration from the other side of this "process of 'conversion,'" the side that had long ago embraced in Christianity a philosophy offering the potential for creating monstrous terrors of far greater magnitude than those "mortal denizens" created for the Anglo-Saxon audience; for these newer monsters threatened not only the immediate, tangible being but the eternal, spiritual being as well. *LotR* is, by Tolkien's own admission, "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision" (Let. 172); thus, Flieger unfairly accuses Tolkien of creating the monsters in *LotR* out of the same philosophical concepts we see reflected in the monsters of *Beowulf*.

Perhaps the following statement from "Monsters and Critics" provides a better indication of Tolkien's perspectives regarding the true monster:

The distinction between a devilish ogre, and a devil revealing himself in ogre-form—between a monster, devouring the body and bringing temporal death, that is inhabited by a cursed spirit, and a spirit of evil aiming ultimately at the soul and bringing eternal death (even though he takes a form of visible horror that may bring

and suffer physical pain)—is a real and important one.
(M&C 36-6)

Unlike the phrase cited by Flieger, we have here a philosophical comment on the part of the writer. It is not a statement directed specifically toward the monsters of Beowulf but toward the concept of the monster in general. Tolkien may have conceived the early Sauron as no more than "a devilish ogre" — a lycanthropic "mortal denizen" — but by the Third Age this monster had undergone what, for the Christian Tolkien, was the ultimate transformation: "The distinction between a devilish ogre . . . and a spirit of evil aiming ultimately at the soul and bringing eternal death." Sauron thus evolved into a far more terrifying monster — at least for Tolkien's 20th-century audience — than Grendel or Beowulf's dragon, for the Dark Lord of *LotR* transcends the limitations of corporeality, penetrating, as a result of his psychical existence, even the darkest corners of Third-Age Middle-earth.

Part 2: Function of the Episode

"It glimpses the cosmic and moves with the thought of all men concerning the fate of human life and efforts" (M&C 33)

As the climactic point of the Quest (that point within fairy-story for which Tolkien "coined the word 'eucatastrophe': the sudden happy turn" [Let. 100] in events that leads to the necessary happy ending), the episode at Mount Doom provides the protagonist (as do the monster episodes in *Beowulf*) with the opportunity to become by his actions what he has been in concept all along: the principal "hero" of the work; that is, he is given the opportunity to perform the specific act of heroism that, if he is successful, will have some degree of salvific impact on the world in which he exists. To surpass the terror and grandeur characterizing the dramatic events of Gandalf's confrontation with the Balrog on the Bridge of Khazad-dum and Sam's ferocious assault on Shelob at the exit of Cirith Ungol is, then, not the essential function of the episode; rather that function is to portray by the same "fundamentally simple recipe for an heroic situation" (M&C 18) an encounter having far greater consequences than either of the earlier two. Tolkien's perspective on the importance of the monster in such a central episode is reflected in a note that Humphrey Carpenter observes was "apparently written for Tolkien's own satisfaction and not sent or shown to anyone else, on . . . a review of *The Return of the King* by W. H. Auden in the *New York Times Book Review*" (Let. 238). In the note Tolkien wrote that "The overthrow of Grendel makes a good wonder-tale,"

because he is too strong and dangerous for any ordinary man to defeat, but it is a victory in which all men can rejoice because he was a monster, hostile to all men and to all humane fellowship and joy. . . . It is the monstrosity and fairy-tale quality of Grendel that really makes the tale important. (Let. 242)

It is significant that Tolkien would make such a note in response to a review of *The Return of the King*, the volume in which Frodo's nemesis is at last defeated and in which what "really makes the tale important" transpires; for

what Tolkien says of Grendel is equally true of the Dark Lord of Middle-earth. That "all men can rejoice" at the defeat of Sauron is precisely that element that gives to the Mount Doom episode its greatest significance, for as Tolkien commented elsewhere in this same note, "[I]f [Sauron] had been victorious he would have demanded divine honour from all rational creatures and absolute temporal power over the whole world" (Let. 243-44). Unlike the Balrog and Shelob, then — both of which are "awakened," in a sense, or at least brought into the larger conflict of the story as a result of an invasion on their limited environs — Sauron threatens not only those who enter his immediate surroundings but those who inhabit "the whole world" of Middle-earth as well.

If, then, we consider (as we must) the consequences of the Mount Doom episode to define its primary function in the overall tale, we must next examine the dramatic elements that make up that episode, those events which as a collective whole lead ultimately to the final consequences. These events pose two critical problems: first, because of Sauron's spiritual form, an actual "confrontation" between hero and adversary never occurs, at least not in the physical sense of Beowulf's confronting of the ogres and the dragon or of Gandalf's and Sam's respective confrontations with the Balrog and the Spider; and second, the hero apparently fails to perform his principal task—the destroying of the One Ring—causing a situation whereby the success of the Quest appears to be achieved in spite of the hero rather than as a result of his successful completion of it. These problems can be appropriately addressed but only when they are considered in light of the thematic principles Tolkien felt inherent in what he called the "recipe for the central situations of such stories" (M&C 17).

The central situation is of course Frodo's Quest, and the "recipe" for that situation consists of a series of conflicts by which we are able to discern his heroic potential; but this is precisely the function of those encounters — they enable us to discern his potential and, hence, are primarily preparatory. The *Beowulf* poet uses this very narrative technique when he allows Beowulf to boast of swimming "fif nihta fyrst" (Beo. 545a) (five nights' time) on the open sea in a "beadohraegl broden" (Beo. 552a) (coat of woven mail) that — rather than drowning him — protects him as he confronts and conquers various "aglaecan" (Beo. 556a) (monsters). Beowulf recounts this episode from his youth just before his confrontation with Grendel to silence the taunts of Unferth, but the passage serves also to inform the audience of the heroic qualities that make Beowulf a worthy opponent for the ogre. Likewise, Frodo has proven himself capable of rising to the heroic on several occasions: his encounter with the Barrow-wight, when "Suddenly resolve hardened in him" (1: 153); his defiance of the Black Riders at the Ford of Bruinen: "By Elbereth and Luthien the Fair," said Frodo with a last effort, lifting up his sword, 'you shall have neither the Ring nor me!' (1: 227); his assault on the cave-troll in the tomb of Balin: "Suddenly, and to his own surprise, Frodo felt a hot wrath blaze up in his heart. 'The Shire!' he cried, and springing beside

Boromir, he stooped, and stabbed with Sting at the hideous foot" (1: 339). But these encounters function primarily to lead up to the major conflict, the final conflict in which he is given the opportunity to achieve his greatest renown.

The Mount Doom passage provides for Frodo that conflict, just as the episode on the Bridge of Khazad-dûm does so for Gandalf and the episode at Cirith Ungol does so for Sam. How then, if this is to be the dramatic apex of the central situation, are we to account for the virtual absence of the principal hero's monstrous adversary? After Frodo claims the Ring we read that

The Dark Lord was suddenly aware of him, and his Eye piercing all shadows looked across the plain. . . . Then his wrath blazed in consuming flame. . . . The whole mind and purpose of the Power . . . was now bent with overwhelming force upon the Mountain. (3: 223)

Sauron promptly sends the Nazgul to take the Ring, but before they can reach Mount Doom, Gollum seizes the Ring and falls into the Cracks destroying himself and the One Ring in the Fires of Orodruin. We then read that

. . . there rose a huge shape of shadow, impenetrable, lightning-crowned, filling all the sky. Enormous it reared above the world, and stretched out towards them a vast threatening hand, terrible but impotent: for even as it leaned over them, a great wind took it, and it was all blown away, and passed; and then a hush fell. (3: 227)

That Sauron's "whole mind and force" is finally focused directly and with "overwhelming" intensity on the hero is, then, as close as Tolkien comes to depicting an actual "face-to-face" confrontation between the two characters. But this is as it should be, and we can see this if we consider both of the principal combatants of this scene in the larger scope of the overall tale.

We have seen elsewhere in the Middle-earth mythology that Sauron is capable of appearing in various forms; but for him to take on any one of these forms, whether it be werewolf, vampire, or even "that of a man of more than human stature" in which he "could appear as a commanding figure of great strength and body" (Let. 332), would weaken him significantly in the crucial moments when he stands to lose everything on which his survival depends, for "It is mythologically supposed that when this shape was 'real', that is a physical actuality in the physical world . . . it took some time to build up. It was then destructible like other physical organisms" (Let. 260). The events on the brink of the Cracks of Doom happen too quickly for Sauron to plan carefully an effective strategy, for the narrator tells us that "the magnitude of his own folly was revealed to him in a blinding flash" (3: 223); but certainly Sauron would have realized that to materialize in any form at this strategic point would only contribute to the immediate problem: the dilution of his own Potency as a result of its externalization and the consequential increased possibility of his own destruction:

The Ring of Sauron is only one of the various mythical treatments of the placing of one's life, or power, in some external object, which is thus exposed to capture or destruction with disastrous results to oneself. If I were to

'philosophize' this myth, or at least the Ring of Sauron, I should say it was a mythical way of representing the truth that *potency* (or perhaps rather *potentiality*) if it is to be exercised, and produce results, has to be externalized and so as it were passes, to a greater or less degree, out of one's direct control. (Let. 279)

As we have seen, Sauron has fallen victim to the vulnerability of physical confrontation once before when, on the bridge at the entrance to Tol-in-Gaurhoth, he had attempted to foil Luthien and Huan's rescue of Beren from his dungeons. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Dark Lord chooses to confront the Ringbearer *psychically*; indeed, it would have been surprising if he had not done so. At Mount Doom he attempts to unite his mental and spiritual Power with that part of himself already in the Ring so that "The whole mind and purpose of the Power" — not just that fragmented portion that has been attempting to overcome Frodo's will from the beginning — is focused on the hero. Tolkien thus presents a graphic portrayal of the flesh doing battle with the spiritual powers of darkness. Such a confrontation must have been for the Christian author the epitome of heroic conflict: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6: 12).

Even the diction in this quotation from St. Paul testifies to its foundational role in depicting the thematic principles underlying the Mount Doom passage; in fact, only in light of this fundamental Christian theme can we begin to understand why Tolkien chose to depict the most crucial conflict of *LoTR* as he did. Frodo's conflict throughout *LoTR* has been an internal one. The same cannot be said of Gandalf or of Sam, neither of whom, by the nature of his character, is at the moment of conflict susceptible to indecision; for both are *willfully* committed to performing the task to which they are called, and neither must undergo an attack directed specifically at that will. For Gandalf the adversary must be a monster that threatens the *cause*, for the wizard's devotion is first to that cause, more so than to the individuals through whom that cause is achieved. His actions result from his ability to see with universal vision — placing the immediate situation in its proper perspective on the larger scale of cosmic events — and from his personal sense of responsibility (as one of the Istari) to the Macrocosm. For Sam the adversary must be a monster that threatens his master, for the younger hobbit — lacking the capacity to perceive with the macrocosmic vision of Gandalf the significance of those events that involve him — is devoted first to his friend and companion. Thus, when the Balrog threatens the Fellowship and when Shelob threatens Frodo, there is no hesitation on the part of either Gandalf or Sam to engage in combat with these monsters. Frodo, on the other hand, has fought a continuous battle within his own will, and as such, it is that psychical force attempting to overcome and break his will that is his principal adversary.

And herein lies the explanation for the second of the

two critical problems in the Mount Doom passage: Frodo's failure to voluntarily destroy the Ring and the justifiable bestowing of the title of "hero" on him in spite of that failure. Before, however, we can prove Frodo worthy of the title of "hero," we must define precisely what Tolkien saw as the heroic ideal. In "Monsters and Critics" Tolkien defines "the old heroes" as those "men caught in the chains of circumstance or of their own character, torn between duties equally sacred, dying with their backs to the wall" (*M&C* 17). Such description certainly applies to Frodo, even more than to Beowulf, for Beowulf is "caught in the chains of circumstance" as a result of his "own character"; that is, he — as a high-mimetic type — actively chooses to involve himself in the "circumstance" of the raids on Hrothgar's hall, relishing the chance to conduct himself in a manner worthy of the praise of those who will come after him. Frodo, on the other hand, is at the opening of *LotR* oblivious to the Great Events taking place outside the limited sphere of The Shire; he has no desire to take part (heroic or otherwise) in those events, and he attempts to rid himself of the Ring by offering it to Gandalf:

"I do really wish to destroy it!" cried Frodo. "Or, well, to have it destroyed. I am not made for perilous quests. I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?"

"Such questions cannot be answered," said Gandalf. "You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess: not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have."

"But I have so little of any of these things! You are wise and powerful. Will you not take the Ring?" (1: 70)

Frodo is thus "caught" in not only the chains of circumstance but the chains of his own low-mimetic character as well, for he must constantly confront the fact that he did not choose to involve himself in the events which have surrounded him — he was chosen. True, he must ultimately decide whether he will take part in the mission to which he is called at the Council of Elrond; but his decision is based not on his perception of his own "power or wisdom" — those two specific qualities mentioned by Gandalf that identify the traditional heroic persona — but rather on his sense of moral obligation.

Frodo is then a combination of the common man and "the old heroes": an ordinary character who finds himself in a larger-than-life situation. He differs from the traditional heroic persona in that whereas Beowulf's conflict is completely externalized in his combat with the ogres and the dragon, Frodo's conflict consists of not only external encounters with various monsters culminating in his confrontation with Sauron, but of the internal conflict generated by recognition of his own inadequacy as well. Like Gandalf and Sam he is willfully committed (once he has made his decision at the Council of Elrond) to the task at hand; but unlike the wizard and the younger hobbit, he is subjected not only to bodily attack but to relentless and prolonged attack on his naked will — the very essence of his being. If, then, he is to be regarded as in any way heroic,

his heroism must be attributed to the fact that he is intelligent enough to see the absurdity of hoping in his own strength, yet he is willing enough to contribute what qualities he has to a cause he believes to be right, no matter how hopeless that cause may be. It is thus his *willingness* to accept the responsibility that confronts him, not the results of his performance, that qualifies Frodo for the title of hero.

Such a position can lead us finally to only one conclusion: the outcome of the encounter (its success or failure) cannot have any impact on our evaluation of the protagonist as a "hero" unless that outcome results from the *willful abnegation by the hero of his accepted responsibility*. The outcome must, of course, influence our assessment of the impact of the hero's actions but not our assessment of the *individual* as the agent of the will that propels those actions. The hero most worthy of esteem is the one who performs as best he can, within the parameters of his unique "heroic situation," regardless of the success or failure of that performance. This is precisely the theme to which Tolkien alludes when he talks in "Monsters and Critics" of "this paradox of defeat inevitable yet unacknowledged" (18). Certainly a major consideration, for example, in our assessment of the aged King Beowulf as a heroic figure is his *willingness* to engage in a hopeless combat — a combat that he realizes will entail in all probability his giving up of worldly existence — so that his fellow countrymen may continue to live in peace and hope — transient though that peace and hope may be. His heroic stature, then, is not gauged by the success or failure of his actions but by the degree of determination with which he performs those actions.

Throughout *LotR* Tolkien's hero exhibits this same heroic determination right up until he reaches the end of his Quest. At the moment of apparent success, however, Frodo departs from the traditional role, for he *denies* his fellow man, *succumbs* to the overwhelming power of the Ring, and *apparently fails* his role in the Quest. This failure, because it *apparently results from denial of accepted responsibility*, takes on a major significance in our assessment of Frodo as a hero. But does Frodo's succumbing to the overwhelming power of the Ring signal a *willful* denial of his accepted responsibility? Again, we cannot argue in Frodo's favor using the success of the Quest as the basis of our argument, for the Quest actually does succeed *in spite of* his actions at Mount Doom. Our concern here is with the success or failure of the protagonist to conduct himself in a heroic manner; that is, "Does Frodo 'measure up' to the heroic ideal?" It is clear that Tolkien did not see Frodo's failure to voluntarily destroy the Ring as diminishing in any way the heroic persona; for in considering "the whole 'theory' of true nobility and heroism that is presented" (*Let.* 326), Tolkien observed that "Frodo indeed 'failed' as a hero, as conceived by simple minds: he did not endure to the end; he gave in, ratted" (*Let.* 326). But,

Frodo undertook his quest out of love—to save the world he knew from disaster at his own expense, if he could; and also in complete humility, acknowledging that he

was wholly inadequate to the task. *His real contract was only to do what he could, to try to find a way, and to go as far on the road as his strength of mind and body allowed. He did that. I do not myself see that the breaking of his mind and will under demonic pressure after torment was any more a moral failure than the breaking of his body would have been—say, by being strangled by Gollum, or crushed by a falling rock. (Let. 327, italics mine)*

Tolkien also contends elsewhere that

There exists the possibility of being placed in positions beyond one's power. In which case (as I believe) salvation from ruin will depend on something apparently unconnected: the general sanctity (and humility and mercy) of the sacrificial person. (Let. 252)

It is thus Frodo's "apparently unconnected . . . humility and mercy" directed towards Gollum that, in fact, brings about the success of the Quest, for if Gollum had been dispatched — as the narrative indicates on at least two occasions he could have been had Frodo not intervened on his behalf — the Quest would apparently have failed. Thus Tolkien brings Gandalf's earlier prophetic assertion that "[Gollum] is bound up with the fate of the Ring" (1: 69) to fruition in a surprising and extremely ironic denouement as Gollum, having rejected Frodo's mercy at the entrance to Shelob's Lair, finds himself at Mount Doom both recipient and dispenser of an absolute justice — a justice not tempered by mercy — when he perishes in the Fires of Orodruin, destroying finally the Power that had destroyed him.

We must also recognize that two quests are completed at Mount Doom, for the "salvation from ruin" to which Tolkien refers concerns not only the temporal salvation of Middle-earth (and this salvation, like that won by Beowulf, is temporal; for "Always after a defeat and a respite, the Shadow takes another shape and grows again" [1: 60]), but the quest for the spiritual salvation of Frodo as well. The destruction of the One Ring achieves the first, the inner quality of the hero the second. Thus, unlike *Beowulf*, where Tolkien claims the "poet has . . . drawn the struggle . . . so that we may see man at war with the hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in Time" (M&C 18); we see in *LotR* man in the midst of that same struggle with the "hostile world," but his "inevitable overthrow in Time" has been replaced by the possibility of his triumph in Eternity. Frodo achieves just such a redemptive victory, for his "mercy triumphs over judgment" (Jas. 2: 13). But for Tolkien, "... a Christian (which can be deduced from my stories)" (Let. 288) who believed the happy ending a critical ingredient to the successful fairy story, the

obtaining of such a triumph by his heroes could never have been in question; for the only truly happy ending from a Christian perspective must be the defeat of the un-defeatable foe, that is, Death.

We see, then, Tolkien's purpose in presenting the events at Mount Doom as he does: to inject into the "same heroic plot" that appears throughout traditional heroic literature — and which is "after all as 'simple' and as 'typical' as that of folktales" (M&C 17) — a contemporary interpretation of an eternal truth. Frodo — as a representative of man and man's spiritual potential within the temporal world — reflects an attempt on Tolkien's part to illustrate in a dramatic context that

The tragedy of the great temporal defeat remains for a while poignant, but ceases to be finally important. It is no defeat, for the end of the world is part of the design of . . . the Arbiter who is above the mortal world. Beyond there appears a possibility of eternal victory (or eternal defeat), and the real battle is between the soul and its adversaries. (M&C 22)

Sauron's horror, then, unlike the Balrog's or Shelob's, lies not in his grotesque appearance or in his capability of bringing about physical death, but in his potential for subjecting his adversaries to a defeat with eternal consequences. I propose that Tolkien would undoubtedly have agreed with the following alteration of his actual statement (cited earlier in this section and made with reference to "Grendel") as a means of encapsulating the function of the events depicted in the Mount Doom episode:

The overthrow of [Sauron] makes a good wonder-tale, because he is too strong and dangerous for any ordinary man to defeat, but it is a victory in which all men can rejoice because he was a monster, hostile to all men and to all humane fellowship and joy . . . It is the monstrosity and fairy-tale quality of [Sauron] that really makes the tale important.

Conclusion

"... I wanted heroic legends and high romance. The result was *The Lord of the Rings*." (Let. 346)

The last 30+ years of criticism aimed at J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* have yielded everything from condemnation of the work as "balderdash," satisfying only those adults who "have a life-long appetite for juvenile trash" (Wilson 314), to praises proclaiming Tolkien to have illustrated "brilliant creative skill" (Giddings and Holland 20) from scholars who have considered the work with regard to its placement (or misplacement) on the honor roll of English literature. The monsters seem to have suffered cruel and unusual treatment here, and if there is any single area possessing the potential for total agreement among otherwise opposing schools of criticism, the area of Tolkien's monsters is certainly it; for even those scholars who have praised Tolkien's triumphs in other areas of *LotR* have more often than not regarded with, at least, caution, and at worst, embarrassment the episodes considered in the preceding study. Thomas Gasque, in his otherwise favorable essay, reflects the typical view regarding the

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three monsters with which this study has been concerned when he says that "For sheer terror, they are on a level with the invention of dozens of science-fiction writers" (157-8). Such a position is somehow ironic, and as Tolkien himself once said, "There is something irritatingly odd about all this" (M&C 13); for such censure is strangely reminiscent of the criticisms Tolkien took to task over 50 years ago, criticisms that he felt had wrongly accused the *Beowulf* poet of placing too much significance on the "irrelevances" (M&C 11) of his poem. Claiming that "... the special virtue of *Beowulf* . . . resides . . . in the theme, and the spirit this has infused into the whole" (M&C 14), Tolkien had gone on to show that that potent theme was first and foremost the "exaltation of undefeated will," proposing that "... it is in *Beowulf* that a poet has devoted a whole poem to the theme" (M&C 18).

The *Beowulf* poet had intended to record not a history but a philosophy revered by a people familiar with the glory and tragedy of war, a people who applauded the achievement of the victor but placed a solemn — and in a sense even greater — honor on the warrior who marched courageously and undaunted into certain defeat. This theme reflected for Tolkien the "profound appeal" (M&C 34) — the timeless significance — of *Beowulf*, and it was to become if not the theme certainly one of the major recurring themes in *LotR*. Tolkien leaves no doubt that its illustration is the immediate aim of each of the three episodes examined in this study. When Aragorn, at the exit of the Mines of Moria, assumes leadership of the Company, he exhorts his companions to carry on, defying the apparent hopelessness of their situation: "Farewell, Gandalf! . . . What hope have we without you? . . . We must do without hope. . . . Let us gird ourselves and weep no more! Come! We have a long road, and much to do!" (1: 347). And we have already seen how Sam, believing his friend and master dead, overcame the "black despair [that] came down on him" (2: 340) at the exit of Cirith Ungol only to experience a new despair when he sees for the first time the distant Mount Doom:

Never for long had hope died in his staunch heart, and always until now he had taken some thought for their return. But the bitter truth came home to him at last: . . . when the task was done, there they would come to an end, alone, houseless, foodless in the midst of a terrible desert. There could be no return. . . . But even as hope died in Sam, or seemed to die, it was turned to a new strength. Sam's plain hobbit-face grew stern, almost grim, as the will hardened in him, and he felt through all his limbs a thrill, as if he was turning into some creature of stone and steel that neither despair nor weariness nor endless barren miles could subdue. (3: 210-11)

Frodo, too, gives expression to this fundamental idea: "Look here, Sam dear lad," said Frodo: "I am tired, weary, I haven't a hope left. But I have to go on trying to get to the Mountain as long as I can move" (3: 195); and again, as he and Sam survey the plain of the Morgai, Frodo resolves, "Still we shall have to try. . . . I never hoped to get across. I can't see any hope of it now. But I've still got to do the best I can" (3: 201).

The monsters, then, are to provide for the various characters that possess heroic potential the vehicle through which that potential may be realized. They are to provide the greatest possible opposition — both physical and spiritual — for it is only in facing seemingly impossible odds that the particular hero's true stamina might be fully explored and dramatically illustrated. Without the Balrog of Khazad-dum Gandalf's removal from the story would have been highly suspect, hindering the successful development of Aragorn as the unquestioned leader of the Fellowship, a role crucial to his preparation as the True King of the coming Age of Men; without Shelob Sam could never have earned the reward of "passing over Sea" to be with Frodo, that passage being an essential component in the consummate "happy ending"; and without Sauron Frodo would have been perhaps the most tragic figure of all: never realizing his own heroic potential, and never bringing to his world the salvation that only he was capable of effecting.

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